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Salvadoran Rebels' Aim Is to 'Defeat' Election

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MEXICO CITY, March 1 — The current guerrilla offensive in El Salvador is aimed at "defeating" this month's elections and forcing the United States-backed junta to initiate negotiations with the opposition, according to two top rebel commanders.

In a lengthy interview here last night, they also asserted that the Salvadoran Army had suffered a major setback in its latest counteroffensive against guerrilla strongholds around Guazapa volcano north of San Salvador and was experiencing growing disciplinary problems among its troops.

"The junta says the elections are possible because the war is controllable," said Robert Roca, the 34-year-old leader of the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers, "but we will defeat the elections, not by attacking voters or polling booths, but by making the war felt at all levels everywhere."

Fernán Cienfuegos, 35, the head of National Resistance, said the month-old offensive involved taking the war from rural areas to the "show window" of San Salvador and other cities, but was not aimed at achieving an immediate military victory. "We see it as consolidating our military position for negotiations," he added.

'Genuine' Elections Is Aim

The two commanders belong to the five-man general command of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, which is made up of the five guerrilla organizations that joined forces in 1980 to combat El Salvador's civilian-military junta. The general command also includes the heads of the People's Revolutionary Army, the Popular Forces of Liberation and the Salvadoran Communist Party.

The commanders reiterated that the guerrillas and their non-Marxist allies in the Democratic Revolutionary Front were ready to negotiate a cease-fire and form a broad-based government that would prepare the country for "genuine" elections. They added that they were willing to travel to Washington to initiate contacts.

Mr. Cienfuegos also disclosed that early in February last year, just days after the rebels' abortive "final offensive," the Reagan Administration agreed that they and two other opposition leaders should make a secret trip to Washington for talks with William J. Casey, the director of Central Intelligence, and Richard V. Allen, then national security adviser.

"We were all ready to go when the trip was called off without explanation," Mr. Cienfuegos said.

Since then, the only contact between the opposition and the Reagan Administration took place last Dec. 15 when Rubén Zamora, a dissident Christian Democrat and member of the Democratic Revolutionary Front, was received in the State Department by the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, Everett Briggs.

Mr. Cienfuegos said that recent guerrilla incursions into Salvadoran cities had stirred "an insurrectional spirit" among the urban population and had demonstrated the "enormous mobility" of rebel columns. "The army has been generally on the defensive," he said, "and our latest information is that the attack on Guazapa has failed."

Mr. Roca added that Guazapa, 20 miles north of the capital, was "a decisive military and electoral battle" because the army hoped that a quick victory there would prevent the rebels from "coming down" to intensify the war in San Salvador over the next month.

The two commanders insisted that the Salvadoran Army was suffering a growing internal crisis marked by insubordination in the ranks and resentment among middle-level officers at the strategy adopted by the army high command, headed by the Defense Minister, Gen. José Guillermo García.

Mr. Cienfuegos asserted that 70 soldiers were in detention at the San Carlos barracks in San Salvador and 43, including two officers, at Ilopango air base.

"In El Paraíso, in Chalatenango Province, 16 soldiers deserted with their weapons," he said. "In Usulután early February, a lieutenant assassinated six soldiers who wanted to desert. In San Miguel, another six soldiers were killed by National Guardsmen."

"We have our people in the army, we've infiltrated the ranks, and that's why the high command is so nervous," he went on. "They even assassinate soldiers that we capture and release because they fear they're going back into the army as infiltrators."

Mr. Roca argued that there were signs that the army could collapse. "The army's performance in offensives has been disastrous," he added.

Questioned about the source of the rebels' weapons, Mr. Cienfuegos said they obtained them on the black market throughout Central America, but had also recovered more than 200 automatic rifles from the army since last August.

Referring to the March 28 elections, Mr. Roca said the campaign had weakened "the enemy" because of infighting among right-wing factions. He charged that former Maj. Roberto d'Aubuisson, the ultraconservative leader of the Nationalist Republican Alliance, was trying to intimidate other rightist parties into join forces against President José Napoleón Duarte and his Christian Democratic Party.

"The United States has so far had to sustain the Christian Democrats and fascists in the army," he added, "but after the elections it may have to support the extreme right."

Insisting again on the need for negotiations, Mr. Roca argued that the surest guarantee that a new Salvadoran government would not pose a threat to United States security would be to find a political solution before the defeat of the Salvadoran Army.

"We're not calling for the destruction of the army," Mr. Cienfuegos added. "We want it purged of criminal and genocidal elements. The logical process is for negotiations to lead to an interim government that holds elections."

Asked about the possibility of direct United States intervention in El Salvador, Mr. Cienfuegos warned that such a move would unite Central America against Washington.